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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BRATISLAVA 000450

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SUBJECT: MODERATE MECIAR ATTEMPTING TO WIN SUPPORT IN SLOVAKIA AND ABROAD

REF: 05 BRATISLAVA 854

Classified By: Ambassador Rodolphe M. Vallee for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a recent meeting with poloffs, HZDS (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) MP and Foreign Relations Committee member Diana Strofova discussed the party's post-election prospects. HZDS is currently polling at around 11 percent and will certainly win seats in the June 17 parliamentary elections. The party is walking the fine line between keeping leader Vladimir Meciar's image vibrant for his hard-core supporters while trying to erase bad memories (both at home and abroad) of Slovakia as the "black hole of Europe" under his authoritarian, corrupt prime ministership from 1993 to 1998. Like other HZDS leaders, Strofova readily admitted that mistakes had been made in the past, but vowed that HZDS was a reformed party. In this year's elections, the party's top three priorities are investment, savings, and regional development, and no door has been closed regarding inclusion in a future coalition. Neither PM Dzurinda's SDKU nor Robert Fico's Smer have ruled out cooperation with HZDS. END SUMMARY.

CAN HZDS SHED ITS PAST?

¶2. (C) Strofova reflected on the history of HZDS as the governing party for most of the post-communist 1990s, saying it was natural that mistakes would have been made during the difficult feat of creating new institutions after the 1993 split of Czechoslovakia. Strofova stressed that this election was very different from those of years past. In the 1990s, the transition from communism to democracy and the free market were the main issues, and in 1998 the focus was keeping Meciar out of the government. In 2006, however, voters are disinterested. Furthermore, post-election coalitions are particularly difficult to predict this year.

COALITION PARTNERS--WITH WHOMEVER WILL HAVE US!

¶3. (C) Like most parties, HZDS would prefer to be a member of a smaller coalition (2 or 3 parties), but Strofova recognized that this probably would not happen. She said it is highly unlikely that HZDS will work with KDH (Christian Democratic Party), due to historical differences and KDH's continued attacks against HZDS. (Comment: We were amused by this phrasing; KDH has stated very clearly that it will never work with Meciar due to his past behavior and acts. End comment.) SDKU (Slovak Democratic and Christian Union) is a more favorable partner, as it has recently tempered its rhetoric against HZDS. Strofova boasted that HZDS has become "more moderate" and now supports "most of" the economic reform of Dzurinda's government. Strofova believes that the EU does not favor the religiously-oriented KDH, and after their falling out early this year, SDKU might be tempted to replace KDH with HZDS in forming a future coalition. She

acknowledged that HZDS voters are most sympathetic to the center-left Smer, but the strong personalities of Vladimir Meciar and Robert Fico would make it difficult to reach an agreement. On the other hand, Strofova noted that Fico had stayed away from TV duels with Meciar to avoid potential conflicts between the two leaders. (Comment: Interestingly, Smer has told us that they have placed greater emphasis this time on attracting older voters outside the main cities--HZDS's traditional base--than on the younger voters they (unsuccessfully) courted in 2002. End comment.) However, Meciar himself seems among the largest obstacles to HZDS's inclusion in the ruling coalition. Meciar as chairman of HZDS, or even as chairman of Parliament, is one thing, but Meciar as a minister is entirely another; the other parties do not want the former PM in any government position.

¶4. (SBU) Strofova acknowledged that Dzurinda's reforms had been necessary, but that too many had been introduced at the same time, deepening the gap between rich and poor and affecting HZDS core voters. Special HZDS working groups have suggested changes to the reforms, and continue to work on proposals. Still, HZDS would prefer to just "fix the negative aspects" of past reforms rather than "change everything."

HZDS REMAINS OPTIMISTIC ABOUT ELECTION RESULTS

¶5. (SBU) Strofova was confident in HZDS gaining a strong percentage of the vote in the June 17 elections, estimating as much as 15 to 20 percent. (Comment: Polls are currently showing HZDS at about 11 percent, but low voter turnout and aggressive action to get core voters to the polls on election day could bump the number higher. End comment.) The party

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is historically underestimated in the polls, and Strofova believes that voters often do not admit their HZDS preference because of societal prejudice against followers of Meciar. The party's strongest support can be found in the cities of Trencin and Nitra, while the larger cities of Bratislava and Kosice tend to vote for other parties; Strofova attributed this to the party's unfavorable history and failure to "sell reform" to the great city centers. HZDS has also lost some of its support in Zilina to the Slovak National Party (SNS).

¶6. (U) Strofova described HZDS's campaign approach as an effort to remain as apolitical as possible in order to prevent the estrangement of voters who are fed up with politics and rhetoric. As a party with a historically older following, HZDS has made efforts to attract young voters. These include visiting schools throughout Slovakia, using the Internet to propel its message, and forming an organization of HZDS youth.

HZDS DETERMINED TO PLAY A ROLE IN NEXT GOVERNMENT

¶7. (SBU) Strofova said that any future government would have to "lean" on HZDS, whether it was included in the government or not. If included in the new government, HZDS would prefer the ministries of Defense, Social Affairs, and Interior in the cabinet. The party's main priorities following the elections would be investment, education, and regional development. Strofova was certain that Slovakia had a positive image abroad, but that the country needed to find a balance between what it offered its foreign partners and what it received in return.

BUT CAN HZDS HOLD ITSELF TOGETHER?

¶8. (C) HZDS has already suffered from divisions and defections from the party. During breakfast at the CMR, KDH chairman Pavol Hrusovsky told Ambassador that Meciar is angry at Vice Chairman of Parliament and of HZDS Viliam Vetteska for

funding his own billboards and demonstrating too much independence from Meciar. Hrusovsky told the Ambassador he thinks this could lead some HZDS members to split from the party after the elections and join a parliamentary coalition as independents.

COMMENT

19. (C) Strofova took a break from her busy campaign schedule because "international acceptance," particularly by the USG, is as high a priority for HZDS as election results. Only a positive showing on both fronts will make HZDS a legitimate partner for the next governing coalition, and the party is desperate to be back in government after eight years on the sidelines. Another HZDS MP, Milan Urbani, is a regular caller at the embassy in a constant but unsuccessful lobbying attempt to win the U.S. "blessing" for Meciar in a future coalition. After the Ambassador attended a recent conference on regional development hosted by a HZDS governor, at which Meciar briefly spoke, HZDS issued a statement declaring this proof of international legitimacy, although the Ambassador did not arrive at the conference until Meciar had left. Tellingly, the sponsors had placed Meciar's conference table nametag next to the Ambassador's.

110. (C) Besides Meciar's continuing erratic behavior as party leader, which has resulted in a mass exodus of members over the years, HZDS has a real policy problem as it seeks greater support; the more HZDS backs the reform agenda of the Dzurinda government to gain international acceptance and coalition potential, the more voters it loses to parties such as Smer and the Slovak National Party (SNS). Even Meciar's public "good behavior" during this campaign seems disingenuous to many observers, who say he seems--intentionally--like "a shadow of his former self." Recent public expressions by Meciar that a Smer-HZDS-SNS coalition would be a good option for Slovakia contradict Urbani's private message that HZDS really wants to work with a SDKU-KDH-SMK coalition in the future. Meciar may be thinking more practically. A strong Smer and HZDS showing theoretically could lead to a smaller coalition than one with right-of-center parties, giving him more leverage. Only the final election results June 18 will clarify HZDS's options and intentions.

111. (C) Bio Note: The 33-year old Strofova appears engaging, pragmatic, and reasonable. She is the sole face in the HZDS line-up that defies its the "Old Boys" image. She obtained her prominence in the party thanks to the influence of her ex-husband, Jozef Majsky, who is currently serving a prison sentence for defrauding thousands of people in various

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business enterprises and pyramid schemes. Strofova aspires to be a foreign policy expert within HZDS. She is a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and participates actively at embassy foreign policy speaker events. Strofova's willingness to admit to past mistakes of HZDS and her skill at speaking diplomatically on behalf of the infamous party were surprising. Our overall impression is that she indeed wants to represent the "new face" of HZDS, but is opportunistic rather than principled and is well-practiced at predicting and projecting the message people want to hear. She is married to a Czech businessman with whom she has a baby daughter. End note.

VALLEE